Prometheus's Role of the Poet

Abstract
This essay examines the characterization of Prometheus in the opening speech of *Prometheus Unbound*, by Percy Shelley, through the lens of Shelley’s “Defense of Poetry” in order to argue Prometheus’ existence as a poet. By giving humanity wisdom and bridging the gap between logic and compassion, Prometheus becomes the point from which imagination, beauty, art, and poetry stems. Prometheus’ role developed into a model of morality and love in contrast to the fear and spite of Zeus, whose influence is reflected in the evils of mankind. Yet, through the torturous reign of Zeus, Prometheus transcends his hate by retracting his curse on Zeus during in Act I of the poem, effectively immortalizing himself as a poet whose sacrifice for humanity became the catalyst for true beauty in the world.

Keywords
Prometheus unbound, Prometheus, role of poet, poetry, Percy Shelley, Romanticism

Disciplines
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Prometheus's Role of the Poet

Percy Shelley, the author of *Prometheus Unbound*, concerns much of his writing with the purpose and acceptance of the poetic. His "Defense of Poetry" is major influence on literary theory and is anticipated by *Prometheus Unbound*. Through Shelley's theories on the purpose of poetry and the poet, one can see that Prometheus' act of betraying Zeus was a poetic act, not in the sense that it is written in verse, but in the sense that it fulfills the purpose of poetry. By bringing humanity wisdom, Prometheus establishes a link and balance between logic and compassion, and begins a movement of imagination through which the goodness of humanity stems.

An idea that is implied in "Defense" but not explicitly explained is the belief that although logic is necessary to live, logic does not supply humanity with compassion. Logic is a means of intellectual experience and is often believed to be separate from emotion. Therefore, humanity needs a quality to negotiate between and combine logic and compassion. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus gives humanity the tool to breach the separation of thought and emotion: wisdom. Wisdom gives man the ability to understand the situations of others through one's own experience; empathy is ultimately an intuited connection between one's past experiences with those of other people. Therefore, the act of giving mankind wisdom is effectively the act of making men human.
The story of Prometheus is of the creation of a poet. He must work through difficult, painful situations for the sake of others and eventually reaches a transcendental state of love and compassion. In Carol Ann Lloyd’s work “Words and Perceptions: Prometheus' Language in Act I of Prometheus Unbound”, Lloyd uses Shelley’s literary theory to analyze the disunity of language and reality in Prometheus’ opening speech. She makes a statement in her article that is incongruent with other evidence in the play. She argues that:

The disunity within Prometheus’ mind is exemplified by his attempt to separate himself from the universe. Through words, he distinguishes between himself and others, "all Spirits. / But One," and goes on to make further distinctions that isolate him from the inhabitants of the earth, as he describes himself looking down at "thy slaves, who thou / Requirest for knee-worship, prayer and praise.” In separating himself from these "slaves" of Jupiter, Prometheus does more than attribute to himself some greater sense of worth; he also absolves himself from responsibility for their condition. Contrary to Shelley's description of a great man who "must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own" (The Defense p. 488), Prometheus seeks to be removed from the beings he describes. (Lloyd)

This passage is problematic for a number of reasons. Overall, the argument that Prometheus, the poet, is separating himself from depravity of humanity does not follow the action of the play. Prometheus’ separation from both humans and Jupiter would requite him from responsibility of the human condition. In the beginning of the play, Prometheus has been suffering for over 3,000 years because he brought knowledge to mankind. This eternal anguish
is horrifying, but it does not cause Prometheus to resent humanity. Instead, the torture has fostered Prometheus’ an intense loathing for Jupiter, to the point where Prometheus is left “eyeless in hate” (Shelley, line 9). Lloyd argues that Prometheus, using words to create the world of his own perception, is purposefully distinguishing between himself and humanity because he does not wish to be responsible for their condition when they so easily fall to the knee in worship of his enemy. This statement is incongruous with the character of Prometheus, who has lived through thousands of years of torture. After an eternity of punishment, he might have been desensitized to the state of mankind, yet at no point does Prometheus regret his decision to bring humanity wisdom. It is through the wisdom of Prometheus that humanity was able to survive the terrible reign of Jupiter. Because humanity survives, they are collectively suffering under Jupiter to the same degree as Prometheus. Unfortunately, mankind is not intelligent enough to understand the hatred and fear that Jupiter embodies, but that is due to the connection of character between Jupiter and Prometheus.

In “Defense,” Shelley is responding to the idea that poetry can become a source of “moral improvement in a man” (Shelley 517). He argues that poetry cannot make someone more humane, or more moral. Poetry can only give people the tools needed to make the right choices; tools such as the ability to imagine, to empathize, and to love. Prometheus does not give mankind wisdom to improve their morals; he gives them wisdom to survive the hatred of Jupiter. By giving humans wisdom, Prometheus is extending the agony of life under tyranny, but the gift of life is ultimately worth the pain. In his very definition of being, Prometheus cannot wish to be separated from the condition of humanity because he is, in effect, the father of wisdom that supports their lives. That being said, Prometheus is also placing himself in a higher
status than humanity, even though he does not wish to be connected to Jupiter. There is a
difference between being empathetic with the fate of mankind and living a life with all the
pains of mortality. Prometheus is a god, and cannot exist on the same level as those he
protects, but his elevation does not affect his concern for those below him. Through Lloyd’s
article, Prometheus is described in a similar manner as Jupiter. The similarity of these
characters is found in Prometheus’ curse, an act of hatred in response to the animosity of
Jupiter. In order for Prometheus to fulfill his role as the poet, he must release all that is Jupiter-
like in himself. Because Prometheus lives with anger and spite for thousands of years, he faces
humanity with a persona that resembles their almighty god. Lloyd argues that Prometheus is
upset with mankind because they bend their knee to a figure of fear and hatred. However,
Prometheus is not being cruel in his view on the state of mankind. He simply does not use
euphemisms to describe the slavery of humanity to the almighty force of Jupiter because there
is no need to make the situation sound more pleasant. He describes humans as slaves who
worship an abusive master not because it is their fault, but because they are effectively
powerless against the spite and the hate of Jupiter. The distinction drawn between Prometheus
and humanity at this point is not one of separation but one of connection because it illustrates
that man cannot possibly to defy Jupiter, and thus Prometheus took it upon himself to accept
that role. Even though Prometheus is facing the thought of eternal suffering, he is doing so to
both protect the life of humans and to resist the tyranny of Jupiter.

"The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the
effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by
replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight" (Shelley, 517). In mythology, Prometheus is
either the bringer of wisdom or the one who gives man fire. However, from a certain perspective, there is no difference between the two gifts. Fire is often an image of creative inspiration, a means of survival and learning. Shelley uses fire as the symbol of imagination in other works, like Adonais, so it would not be an unlikely assumption that wisdom, fire, and imagination are gifted in tandem. Imagination is one of the most important aspects of the human condition; it is the ability to love and to create. By giving mankind wisdom, Prometheus is making poetry possible, and through the start of poetry, man exercises his moral worth. Morality is not something that is given, and poetry does not make a man more moral. The benefit of poetry is that it makes one see the beauty of the world and, in turn, learn to encourage that beauty by acting in a moral way. Poetry stimulates the beauty of action, of wanting to promote the good in the world even through the darkness of Jupiter’s tyranny.

By bringing humanity imagination along with wisdom, Prometheus gives mankind language. The ability to communicate with one another, through poetry or prose, is a large part of what it means to be human. Even more, the ability to understand the beauty of that language and communication is what defines the human condition as something awe-inspiring. Language is the outlet for imagination just as much as it is the power to make change. Prometheus uses his words to curse Jupiter out of anger and hate but he has the power to revoke the hatred he is promoting. Because Prometheus gives people language and imagination, he is granting them the choice to continue Jupiter’s reign of hate or extend the love found within poetry. In defining this ability to choose, Prometheus is granting humanity the faculty the act as he does. If Prometheus is the story of a poet reaching his full measure of his power, then humanity’s story is one of following the poet who taught them the beauty of
poetry. Mankind is able to make the same choices and same mistakes as Prometheus; they can exercise the power of language through curses and they can take those words away. Simply by having the capacity for imagination, humans are able to act in the same way as the gods.

Lloyd argues that Prometheus wants to separate himself from both Jupiter and humanity because they partake in the same power structure of domination and submission. I have already discredited the idea that Prometheus would want to disconnect himself from those who follow in his example. However, this argument leads on to analyze how Jupiter is related to humanity even through his tyrannical reign and the resulting implications of Prometheus’ prior hatred of Jupiter. During Jupiter’s usurpation of the heavens from the Titans, Prometheus’ intelligence was the deciding factor of Jupiter’s victory. Yet, when Prometheus challenged Jupiter and gave humanity wisdom, Jupiter sentenced Prometheus to eternal agony. Out of grief, Prometheus speaks the curse that foresees the downfall of Jupiter’s reign. Jupiter is not meant to be a sympathetic character; he tortures Prometheus for thousands of years for making the lives of humans easier and more beautiful. In the background of these actions is the implicit motivation for Jupiter to imprison an ally: Jupiter is afraid. Fear is a common emotion, the feeling that something precious might be taken away, and a feeling that pain, danger or evil is impending. However, Jupiter is supposed to be the ruler of gods and humans. The highest god of all gods should not be penchant to basic human emotion; to be afraid and act upon that fear is a human weakness.

Perhaps, instead of Jupiter being prone to human weakness, people gained the fault from Jupiter’s example. Prometheus states that “Evil minds/ Change good to their own nature. I gave all/ He has; and in return he chains me here” (Shelley, lines 380-382). Humanity is being
affected; taught to hate and to cause suffering through Jupiter’s influence, just as they were
taught to love and to imagine through Prometheus’ wisdom. A paradoxical thought emerges
from the influence of Jupiter on the evil of man— if Prometheus once hated the faults of Jupiter,
did he feel the same about the echoed faults in humanity? Merely because humanity suffers
and worsens because of the evil contaminating their world does not mean that they are truly
evil. In more ways than one, Prometheus’ gift of his own way of life is what saves humanity
from Jupiter. His good is balanced with Jupiter’s evil, and humanity is given the power to create
art and love, something that will last longer than Prometheus’ torture. Through the
continuance of art, poetry, language, and love, a part of Prometheus is suspended in time.
Jupiter cannot accomplish that suspension because his people do not love him. One sees
through this thought, the strife between Prometheus and Jupiter is not over Prometheus’
disobedience, but over the ability to lead and to create. Jupiter wishes to be the dominating
force over Earth and Heaven. Prometheus wants the world to live in harmony— a battle won
through love and poetry. Jupiter recognizes that Prometheus is more powerful, but does not
understand the source of Prometheus’ power. To Jupiter, power is a threat to his throne.
Prometheus has power because he has wisdom, compassion, love and imagination. He is loved
by humankind and other gods for being the martyr that stands for those weaker than himself.
Because Jupiter does not understand love, he cannot be loved. He rules through force and fear
because those who are afraid will not fight back. Ultimately, by imprisoning Prometheus to
solidify his throne, Jupiter is creating the opportunity for his own usurpation. Not only does it
cause Prometheus to curse him and begins the chain of events that leads to Demogorgon’s rise
in power, but by taking away Prometheus, Jupiter loses sight of all the virtues Prometheus
embodies. The life of beauty, poetry, love, and imagination is chained to rot and suffer while the calculating logic of Jupiter reigns without regard to the suffering of his subjects.

The definition of humanity is found through the imprints left by Jupiter and Prometheus. Both influence the development of human capability; for love and for hate. Without the contrast of the two, the meaning of one alone becomes dulled and unappreciated. With this thought in mind, the terror of Jupiter and the suffering of Prometheus become necessary events in the creation of the basis of human structure. For Prometheus, his suffering led to his transcendence into a figure of poetic love. Moreover, Jupiter, the unsympathetic figure that lives in fear and hate, serves as the contrast that distinguished love as the highest virtue of life.

In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley uses his beliefs on the poetic purpose and the importance of the poet on the lives of humanity. Prometheus, the embodiment of the poet, love, and martyrdom, is contrasted with the immature, logical, and sociopathic characterization of Jupiter in order find meaning in virtue. Humanity is caught in the gods’ war of influence, and in effect shaped in the image of both the Titan and the King. Prometheus’ gift of wisdom is not only the gift to survive the hatred of Jupiter; it is the aptitude for creation, for language, and for imagination. In the end, the restoration of Prometheus is a story of the development of what it means to be human and why poetry is so essential to human existence.
Works Cited

